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**An Oral History of H. Warren Buckler
Conducted by Ellen Paul**

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Abstract: Humphrey Warren Buckler (1906-1984) was a preeminent Maryland lawyer and local activist. He worked for the Citizen's Planning and Housing Association, first as a volunteer, then as counsel, then as Vice President, and ultimately as President. In this oral history interview, Buckler discusses his work in advocating for urban development and housing support for low-income families within Baltimore City. He expands upon how this work brought him into frequent contact with important figures such as Peggy Waxter, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, Theodore McKeldin, and Verda Welcome.

Note on Oral History: Oral history is a methodology of gathering, preserving, and sharing the voices and memories of individuals and communities. As primary material, it documents personal reflections, commentary, and recollections, and is not intended to present a verified or "complete" history of events.

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H. Warren Buckler was interviewed on June 16, 1976, at his residence at 1002 Bellemore Road in Baltimore City. Ellen Paul conducted the interview as a part of a class in Oral History held at the Maryland Historical Society (now Maryland Center for History and Culture) in January of 1976.

Paul [00:00:07] The Maryland Historical Society, June 16th, 1976. The interview is with Mr. H. Warren Buckler at Mr. Buckler's home on Bellemore Road in Baltimore. The interviewer is Ellen Paul.

Paul [00:00:29] All right, let's start again. My first question was about your date and your place of birth, and your background in Baltimore.

Buckler [00:00:35] I was born in Baltimore on May 27th, 1906. I was educated at the Calvert School and the Park School in Baltimore. Later attended Harvard College and Harvard Law School. I entered the practice of law in Maryland and have been a practicing attorney ever since.

Paul [00:00:58] So you've grown up here and you're quite familiar with the area and with the people here and the politics?

Buckler [00:01:03] Yes. I'm part—(unintelligible) familiar. Of course, one forgets as the years go by and I was out of Baltimore for about five years when I was assistant general counsel to the Navy.

Paul [00:01:18] And when you came back, you worked with public housing, is that right? After the war? (unintelligible; speaking at the same time).

Buckler [00:01:23] No, when I came back I intended to practice law, of course. I had long worked in the Citizen's Planning and Housing Association as a volunteer effort and subsequently became president of it.

Paul [00:01:39] And since then you've basically been in private practice and these other events, that we'll go over.

Buckler [00:01:45] Yes, I've basically been in private practice and most of my activities are slowing down as I get older.

Paul [00:01:52] (laughs) What sort of influences—educational or religious or personal events or influences—caused you to become interested in civil rights?

Buckler [00:02:02] I think my conscience, I suppose, is the strongest force that made me become interested in civil rights. The abuse, I say, or discrimination against qualified Blacks and the growing urge for Black people to acquire an equal citizen status. This was implemented when I was in the Navy and by the fact that I joined a series of cooperatives in Philadelphia where integration was complete and became adjusted to the idea, despite my Civil War background.

Paul [00:02:51] I take it that means you had a rather conservative family background?

Buckler [00:02:54] A very conservative family background, yes. Making the world as it was, was the training that I had as a child; I was brought up that way. You know, Blacks were domestics and they were dearly loved, but were kept in their place.

Paul [00:03:12] Was that a predominant feeling here in Baltimore prior to the Second World War?

Buckler [00:03:19] That second was a predominant feeling. It varied from neighborhood to neighborhood. In the upper-class neighborhood where I was brought up it was accepted by both Blacks and whites as the way the world was and this was the way it had to be.

Paul [00:03:35] Did World War Two have any noticeable effect on that in this town that you noticed when you came back?

Buckler [00:03:42] I think it did create a great deal of turbulence. However, my recollection is, that it was after World War Two, that the Army and the Navy adopted policies of integration. Before that time all military people in the armed services were segregated. I can remember back to the World War One when regiments were formed and there were nothing but white regiments and Black regiments, they were never mixed. As a matter of fact, there was quite a famous parade here in Baltimore, at which President Wilson showed up. And I was in the (unintelligible) a small boy. And the Black regiment virtually took over with their (unintelligible), but they were still a Black regiment.

Paul [00:04:40] Did you have any sort of participation in the civil rights protests in the forties and fifties, such as department store protests? Mrs. Waxter told me about one protest where there were stickers that were put on the bills to protest against the fact that Black people couldn't go into the stores and try on clothes. Or, say, picketing of Ford's Theater, or were you involved at all with the NAACP? That sort of activity.

Buckler [00:05:06] Yes, we were involved in the picketing of Ford's Theater and the picketing of the Lyric, I think, and similar activities mostly generated by Mrs. Jackson and the NAACP. As a matter of fact, we marched—at least I marched in the picket line of Ford's Theater. And although we had season tickets for whatever the plays were at the time, we refused to attend.

Paul [00:05:37] Mhm. So you basically both boycotted and picketed?

Buckler [00:05:41] That's right.

Paul [00:05:44] And I understand that at one point you represented a Citizens Education Committee in St. George's County?

Buckler [00:05:51] In Prince George's County.

Paul [00:05:53] Prince George's County, I'm sorry.

Buckler [00:05:55] Yeah.

Paul [00:05:55] Prince George's County. Could you tell me a little bit about that lawsuit?

Buckler [00:06:00] I'm really very vague about it now. This was an effort on the behalf of—I think it was instigated by ACLU if I'm not mistaken—the American Civil Liberties Union—against the deliberate use of the neighborhood school scheme to prevent the Blacks from integrating. Now, I

think this was after the Supreme Court decision if I'm not mistaken. I represented the Citizens Committee for the State Board of Education, along with a very distinguished lawyer from Washington whose name I have forgotten. And we achieved only a very partial degree of success, as I remember it.

Paul [00:06:43] Were most of the lawsuits at that time considered successful, or were they basically give-and-take with trade-offs? You know, "We'll let some students in, but we won't desegregate."

Buckler [00:06:59] Most of the lawsuits in my recollection in Maryland were unsuccessful, usually for technical or procedural reasons. The courts would take the position that civil rights had been violated, but the people who invoked the suits had no standing to sue. In our case, before the State Board of Education, this was an administrative proceeding. And my recollection is that the State Board itself was already integrated, due to Governor McKeldin's efforts. There were at least two Black members of the board, which made our efforts—our chances more successful.

Paul [00:07:44] What year were you elected to the City Council?

Buckler [00:07:46] In 1947.

Paul [00:07:49] So then you really didn't have too much direct dealing with McKeldin?

Buckler [00:07:55] No, no. He either was governor or had been governor by the time I was elected, I think.

Paul [00:08:04] How did he deal with the city of Baltimore while he was governor? Was it one of his prime interests or was he very, very attentive to the entire state? What was his basic focus while he was governor and while you were on City Council?

Buckler [00:08:20] My impression is that Mr. McKeldin's electoral base was largely Black. You have to remember that, in the old days—and I refer to pre-World War Two—the Black population of the city was largely Republican. This was before the New Deal revolution. And Mr. McKeldin received an enormous amount of support from the Black community, politically. Therefore he was obligated to them as a successful candidate when he was elected governor. And he made his obligation, a matter of personal faith, which led to the appointment of numerous state officials—Black state officials—by the governor, which all of us applauded. But my personal contact was very minimal.

Paul [00:09:16] So Baltimore was just one of his many concerns during those years. It wasn't his primary interest.

Buckler [00:09:23] That is correct. However, I think he was trying to make more progress in Baltimore because there was where his Black power base was rested. It was not feasible to do too much in the way of integration in the counties.

Paul [00:09:38] Could you tell me a little bit about the Community Relations Commission?

Buckler [00:09:42] Community Relations Commission was the outgrowth of a voluntary agency that—an advisory agency that the city had had, I think, for some years before McKeldin became mayor the second time. And he made this one of his points in his election and lived up to his plan:

the formation of an agency which would accept complaints of discrimination and seek to eliminate them—in the private industry and in government employment. And he enlisted my efforts along with several others to draft an appropriate ordinance to establish the commission with the power to enforce its orders—with actual power. I took a very active part in the drafting process and in lobbying the ordinance through the City Council. This was after I ceased to be a member of the Council. And the ordinance was finally passed as a result of—The passage of the ordinance in there made me the first chairman and I held that office for three years, I think. He reappointed me but the forces of segregation had risen in the Council by that time, charging that anybody supporting civil rights was obviously a communist, and I was defeated for reappointment.

Paul [00:11:16] At that time did McKeldin ever step in and support you and involve himself in it?

Buckler [00:11:22] He did the best he could. Don't forget, it was a Democratically controlled council and he had comparatively little (unintelligible) of influence in that body. He did everything he possibly could and wrote me quite a wonderful letter afterwards, but that's about all he could do.

Paul [00:11:42] Can you remember what years you were on the Community Relations Commission? What the dates were?

Buckler [00:11:51] I'm a little vague, but it was in the fifties.

Paul [00:11:51] Okay.

Buckler [00:11:51] Or in the sixties, I have forgotten—It was when he was mayor.

Paul [00:11:57] His second term.

Buckler [00:11:58] In his second term, yes. And the ordinance was passed about one year after he was elected.

Paul [00:12:05] And how did this agency function? Did you report to the Council or did you report to McKeldin?

Buckler [00:12:10] No, we had totally independent power. We were authorized to receive complaints, to investigate complaints, to hold administrative hearings, and seek to reconcile complaints, and when we couldn't succeed in reconciliation at the administrative level, we were authorized to apply to courts for enforcement of our orders. The latter was a very distressing experience because the courts were reluctant to enforce the orders and they did everything they possibly could to avoid doing so. But we were quite successful in reconciliation and in achieving compliance at the administrative level.

Paul [00:12:57] Were you forced to take cases to court very often?

Buckler [00:13:00] Not very often, no.

Paul [00:13:02] Do you feel that the work that was done there was basically a case-by-case, where you had involved yourself with larger issues?

Buckler [00:13:12] Initially, it was case-by-case, that is, complaint-by-complaint. But we soon found that many Blacks were reluctant to take the risk of making a complaint because of the

knowledge that they could suffer other job damage or some other form of victimization. So we initiated a great many investigations on our own without complaint, which we had the power to do. And on the basis of those investigations, we found many instances of general discrimination which didn't involve any given individual complaining.

Paul [00:13:51] Okay, let's go on a little bit to the Citizens Planning and Housing Association. Would you like to just describe what that was? I found a great deal of material, and I'd like to get your interpretation of what sort of—

Buckler [00:14:02] Well, the Citizen's Planning and Housing Association was originally born for the purpose of promoting sound city planning in Baltimore, which virtually didn't exist at the time, and also for the purpose of a kind of upgrade in the available housing supply for all races, Black and white, which isn't allowed to deteriorate—the housing is not allowed to deteriorate largely as a result of the neglect by landlords. This was our fundamental function. It's really hard to believe, but at the time we started one of our crusades was against the—was to eliminate the outside toilets, which many houses possessed. There was no inside plumbing of any kind. Also, to eliminate all kinds of heating devices which caused fumes to go to the residents and very often asphyxiate the occupants. Also to eliminate rent discrimination. The refusal of landlords to keep their properties in repair but demand the rent nevertheless. We were instrumental in forming the Housing Court which for quite a while functioned with great efficiency; we were instrumental in fighting zoning discrimination; we were instrumental in promoting the public housing program, which had the great benefit of providing decent, safe, and sanctuaried housing for people with low-income. And—which was bitterly fought by the landlords. We were instrumental in forcing higher standards. One of our great successes was establishing, within the Health Department, a group of so-called police sanitariums, who made frequent inspections of properties to ascertain whether they were in compliance with the health code and when they found that they were not bringing the landlords in for court and requiring a compliance. And this was a very successful effort.

Paul [00:16:31] And this is an entirely voluntary Association?

Buckler [00:16:34] It was a voluntary association that concerned citizens—originally born by a Ms. Frances Morton and George Waxter and Mr. Harry Scarff, an architect. S-C-A-R-F-F. And we were smaller at the beginning. We grew rapidly because concerned citizens had the terrible feeling that their city was falling apart around them and that they had no means for combating this collapse.

Paul [00:17:16] And you were—At various times you were their counsel, their vice president, and their president.

Buckler [00:17:20] That's correct.

Paul [00:17:21] And that was in 1956 that you were the president?

Buckler [00:17:24] I think so, yes.

Paul [00:17:25] Okay. What specific events or problems caused you personally to join this organization? Did you have some sort of daily contact, for example, with these problems? Or was there something that brought it to your attention?

Buckler [00:17:44] No, I think to a large degree, a do-gooder impulse, let's put it that way. And I had a feeling that the citizen's action—I felt strongly that citizen's action could compel

governmental reform, which we succeeded in doing. My interest originated, I believe, from the fact that when I was quite young as a practicing lawyer, I was asked to join the then Family and Children's Society, where we were instrumental in seeking to obtain the minimum amenities for the starving and the affected during the Depression—because Ms. Morton was primarily a social worker, to help her get organized in the CPA trade. That was where my activity centered in, rather than the Family and Children's Society.

Paul [00:18:47] How did Theodore McKeldin react to this group? Did he work with you? Was he aware of it?

Buckler [00:18:52] Oh, yes. He was very, very responsive. I might add that Judge Waxter was one of the principal motivating forces to get us started, and Judge Waxter was then the head of the Department of Public Welfare. And he did more, I suppose than any other single individual to get this type of citizen's action moving.

Paul [00:19:14] Did McKeldin—

Buckler [00:19:15] McKeldin responded with great interest.

Paul [00:19:19] But you always worked as an autonomous body with nothing to do with the city government at all?

Buckler [00:19:23] That's right. Totally supported by citizens.

Paul [00:19:25] Okay. And did McKeldin ever participate himself as a private citizen in this group?

Buckler [00:19:32] I don't remember. He appeared and spoke before us many, many times, but I don't think he ever took an active part as a citizen.

Paul [00:19:42] Mhm. What was his general relationship to the efforts of private citizens such as Lillie Mae Jackson or the Citizen's Planning Group? What sort of response did he had? Was he very favorable or did he welcome an individual initiative?

Buckler [00:19:56] He not only welcomed but encouraged individual initiative. He was very responsive to Lillie Jackson's efforts, which were more militant than ours. And he responded, urging them to bring pressure to bear. The technique fundamentally was on the part of a government official who knew that he didn't have the votes or the strength individually to do something on his own motion, urging citizens to arise and push and press and lobby and campaign to force a governmental results that he wanted to see accomplished. And this was a technique where he invited the pressure.

Paul [00:20:42] This group was not really focused on so much the Black citizens of Baltimore, but all the citizens who had substandard or poor housing.

Buckler [00:20:50] That is fundamentally true, yeah. Although, of course, most of the substandard housing was in Black neighborhoods.

Paul [00:20:57] Mhm. And do you feel that these goals have been accomplished? I know you can see the before and after pictures in some of the material that was put out by the Association. Do you feel—As you go through Baltimore now, do you feel that a great deal has been done?

Buckler [00:21:13] Yes, I think a great deal has been accomplished. There is an enormous amount more to accomplish. But the impetus that has been started, continues. And I believe that more and more evidence of a willingness on the part of FHA, HUW, to do cooperative housing and urban development of the city and so forth, to carry on this effort, is quite great. Mr. Robert Embry is now the head of the Department of Housing and Urban Development as one of, what I would call, Ms. Morton's trainees. She brought him into the picture.

Paul [00:21:56] I noticed that one of the concerns of the association was liquor licensing, and I know that that's also one of the great concerns of Lillie Mae Jackson. Did you ever work together with her on this problem?

Buckler [00:22:07] Yes, I work mostly with her daughter, who is Mrs. Mitchell, who is a lawyer to oppose extensive liquor licensing in Black neighborhoods. The objective—and also with Senator Verda Welcome, who was quite active in what was known as the Northwest Baltimore Association, I think they called it—the basic purpose was to prevent the destruction of Black neighborhoods by having a liquor store on every corner.

Paul [00:22:39] And let me ask you this: there were certain plans to put some schools and other buildings in Parklands. McKeldin and other people seemed to think that this might be a good idea. What was the reaction of the Black community to those plans?

Buckler [00:22:56] Well, in some cases they were favored. I think the one where it was accomplished was in small, park areas in what is known as the Harlem Park Urban Development Area—urban redevelopment. You see in many of these sections where the Black community grew up and moved, where old—originally old German communities, were large squares—maybe two or three blocks square—were set aside as parks by the developers and the houses boarded around them. And when it came to dividing out the school facilities, quite frequently parts of these parks were taken for that purpose. They were lands dedicated by the developers at the time, they were building the old brick and brownstone, three-story houses to renovate, and they were taken for this purpose. In many instances, there was opposition because there was no open space for playgrounds. But in the—Lafayette Square, I think was the one that I remember, particularly. About half of the square was taken over by a primary school building, which was developed as a park-school project—park dash school project. This was one of the major efforts that was made to utilize the parks more as playgrounds rather than for passive recreation.

Paul [00:24:32] When problems like this arose did McKeldin go directly to the interested groups such as the Northwest Baltimore Association or did he go directly to the people in the area and talk to them? Or did he deal with them through lawyers and through representatives to the city council? How did he handle these problems? What was his personal approach?

Buckler [00:24:51] I think the governor's personal approach was the kind that I've previously defined. He did indeed talk about these various efforts, but he always invited pressure from the groundswell—from the community—up toward government—on him and on others to produce the results desired. It was an invitation for someone else to do something and he'd government going, both administratively and among elected officials.

Paul [00:25:22] So he pushed other people to do the work as well. He didn't just take it all upon himself, but tried to—

Buckler [00:25:27] (unintelligible; speaking at the same time) That's right. Now he—

Paul [00:25:28] —to get other people to feel the same way.

Buckler [00:25:29] He provided the leadership where necessary. But his technique for giving himself the power of leadership was to invite community pressure.

[00:25:39] *pause in recording*

Paul [00:25:42] We were talking about Governor McKeldin's leadership and his ability to get other people to do the same type of thing that he was interested in. Do you think that other people did it because he was pressuring them or because he really genuinely got them interested?

Buckler [00:25:55] I think it was because they were initially interested and he suggested that pressure was the right way to get the results desired.

Paul [00:26:06] Alright, earlier, before we started recording, we were talking a little bit about the Equal Opportunity Commission. Could you explain to me how you were involved in that and exactly what that was?

Buckler [00:26:16] I wasn't directly involved in the Equal Opportunity Commission, this was a voluntary—or this was a commission set up by city ordinance, at the very early stage, which merely was advisory. It had no powers of any kind except to point out where discrimination existed. And that Commission was abolished when the Community Relations Commission was established by city ordinance.

Paul [00:26:45] How did—I understand that one of the problems was to get the city departments to hire Black people. Couldn't McKeldin use his great power and his influence and his public force to get these departments to hire Black people? After all, he was the mayor and at one time the governor.

Buckler [00:27:06] It was easier said than done. The city departments would suggest that Black people were not qualified, they couldn't pass civil service examinations. The pressure in the laboring areas was from councilmen representing white constituents who wanted whites on the jobs. The local unions—mostly the Classified Municipal Employees Association, which was then sort of the union for all city employees, opposed the admission of Blacks into the union. And it was quite a serious effort to get these various entrenched departments to change their ways. I remember once during the second administration of the mayor when we had a very extensive hearing in his office on the question of city employment, and the then director of Public Works admitted that the qualifications were so set up that it virtually excluded Black participation. He also admitted that in vetting contracts for city work to private contractors, there was very often—There was always a nondiscrimination clause in the contracts as far as contractor's employment was concerned. But the City Department of Public Works was careful never to enforce the clause.

Paul [00:28:53] These are all the different associations you had with McKeldin on a very official level. How did you first meet the man?

Buckler [00:29:01] I first met Ted McCallion when I was active in the formation of the Junior Association of Commerce and he was also. And my recollection is that back in the thirties, he became president one year of the Association of Farmers in the city. And he and I worked very

closely together in that activity. This was more on the question of—more of the issue of building up the city as a viable commercial and entertainment area than it was relating to racial discrimination.

Paul [00:29:41] Mhm. Were there—was there an effort, even at that time, though, to involve Black employers and Black employees and Black youngsters going into business?

Buckler [00:29:50] I don't remember any such that at that time.

Paul [00:29:53] No? Okay. Was your relationship with McKeldin ever a social one?

Buckler [00:29:58] Well, it was hardly personal. I don't, uh—There wasn't mutual entertainment in his home and our home, you know.

Paul [00:30:07] Let me switch now to the 1960s. When Black militancy began, were the efforts of the groups such as the Citizens Planning and Housing Association rejected by those people?

Buckler [00:30:20] In many instances, they were, as being too slow, yes. Too slow and too plotting. This is the experience that both the Urban League, NAACP, and the Citizens Planning and Housing Association experienced. The militants, in effect, embarrassed us by property destruct—

[00:30:39] *end of recording*